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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the need for global study of the link between socioeconomic priorities and the news values expressed by the mass media. Although the "gate keeper" theory is still considered to be valid (that is, the assumption that the media is selective in what it presents), additional audience research is suggested. The impact of a study in Arab countries of the "gate keeper" concept and audience preferences and remarks is described. Preliminary findings, covering one week of press, radio, and television news stories, indicated that, after presidential, royal, and national political news, aspects of economic development were most frequently covered. The "gate keeping" function in the Middle East, then, can be perceived as the result of a national consensus of socioeconomic priorities and news values. Biographical information about this paper's author is appended. (KS)

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NEWS VALUES AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC PRIORITIES

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I

This is not another "Mr. Gates"[1]. A repetition of the same process along the lines of Paul B. Snider in an attempt to determine the effect of changing times on news values will not serve our purpose which is, more or less, a re-exploration of the existing or missing link between news values and socio-economic priorities.

Such an exploration cannot be confined to the US over-sophisticated scene. A communication revolution is now making the world smaller than ever before, but compared to the US the rest of the world is still bigger and essentially different. In any attempt to adequately discuss this "link", the field of vision has to be considerably widened and should of necessity include all media, not just a "non-metropolitan newspaper", and should likewise include countries which are less developed or less affluent than the United States. Those countries may have socio-economic priorities different from those prevailing in North America or Western Europe but are nevertheless overwhelmingly exposed to American or European media influences fraught with values and priorities which might be alien to their deep-rooted traditions or incompatible with their actual stage of development. Our work in this field has to be global in order to be adequate and more realistic.

Moreover, such a study should not overlook attempts on national and international levels to use communications and information to support and accelerate economic, social and cultural development in many countries of the world. News is an integral part of any information system and news values with their implications are therefore fundamental to the formation of national communications policies.

As far as methodology is concerned, the "gate keeper" approach is still valid, but an audience appraisal of values and priorities together with audience influence on choice and selection of news should always be of interest. We can never have too much audience research especially in developing countries where the formation of communication policies is often done with little or no audience research.

In many cases this one way approach has led to erroneous or subjective value judgments. Use of media in promoting development programs in such cases did not produce the intended results. Responses did not meet the expectations of economic and social planners. In many countries, such issues as productivity, family planning, abortion, desert reclamation, energy conservation, water resources, drug addiction, crime, juvenile delinquency, wasteful consumer habits, poverty and illiteracy have been among areas of social and economic work where the media failed to have positive and active response due to an inherent contradiction of values and social priorities in media presentation of news and views. The media is even accused of perpetrating or accentuating some of the social evils connected with affluence or poverty, with over-development or under-development.

By the same token, contradictions of news values may have an adverse effect on the domestic, international or transnational flow of information resulting in distorted images, frustrations and antagonistic or apathetic attitudes.

Global modeling or dependence on borrowed models might be misleading, while fragmentation or phenomenological isolation of facts within national or regional boundaries tends to disregard very important changes in the world communications picture due to an increased but as yet unmeasured and unmapped flow of information. Here the interdependence of news values and socio-economic priorities is a very important factor which has to be taken into account in studying and analyzing world communications flow.

An amplification of the concept of "news that's fit to print" to make it cover news disseminated by all media will certainly be helpful in pointing at a standard of practice that is capable of resurrecting a series of spectres old and new, each claiming to be the guardian angel of social equilibrium and decency or on the other hand progress and welfare of the masses. Newsworthiness is as controversial a standard as anything in the social and psychological context of mass communication but an exchange of concepts and experiences from as many parts of the world as possible and from varied cultural, social and economic backgrounds will at least provide some aggregate of variables at work in the interaction of news values and socio-economic priorities. In this context we cannot afford to lose sight of a fact created by the fast and widespread development of mass communication. Now, in spite of all differences

and obstacles that obstruct an adequate and balanced flow of information, "our common pool of media knowledge (is gradually establishing) a new set of neighbours for us, based not on geographic location but shared information."[2] Mass communication, in spite of any attempt at illegal, illegitimate or immoral manipulation of its capabilities, domestically or internationaly, and in spite of the blowup distortion or interuption it may bring to the image or images of morality, ethics or value systems, is capable, by its very nature, of allowing us to share more information with more people and consequently more human experiences are becoming common property irrespective of ethical, cultural or socio-economic differences. This common information environment "standardizes backgrounds and attitudes in everyday life."[3]

Some issues have risen during the last few years to this universal prominence and no "gate keeper" can deny news pertaining, for example, to the areas of pollution, hunger, healthcare, racial discrimination, crime and poverty the place of a story of a "high news value". These have become consensus issues throughout the world due to the spread of mass media, and in return, the newsworthiness of such stories is dictated by the social considerations that have made of these issues a world-wide concern.

On a smaller scale, another "gate keeper" may find himself in conflict with his conscience when two or more systems of values, his own and those of his organization and/or his audience are difficult to reconcile. When the conflict is between public and private attitudes, the "gate keeper" most often evades the conflict by a departmentalization of his personality. He simply agrees in acquiescence with the values of his

social group and accepts its priorities. When the conflict is with the system of values prescribed by his organization, the problem is often solved by quitting. Otherwise, as Sander Vanocur, formerly with NBC, puts it, "you find more and more that your journalistic behaviour pattern tends more and more to be shaped towards an expression not of what you believe but rather towards what Big Mother (NBC) will find acceptable."[4] You become part of the establishment. You modify your own personal values in accordance with the requisites of the organization. In some cases, certain social priorities are surrendered by "gate keepers" employed by commercial media when they clash with economic gains, and by "gate keepers" employed by government owned media when they are considered a menace to social, political or economic equilibrium. Most often omission of sensitive issues is the standard practice. One flagrant case is cited by Donald McDonald in a very interesting article on the Media's Conflict of Interests.[5]

The "gate keepers" often transform themselves or are transformed by their socio-economic environment into "standard bearers". Their choice and selection of news becomes more militantly active in promoting the priorities of the socio-economic structure to which they belong. But here again lies the danger that the contents of communication become deliberately adjusted to fit an ideology or counterideology. This type of distortion was discussed in detail by Harold Lasswell as far back as 1948 when he cited among the most serious threats to efficient communication those related to the values of power, wealth and respect.[6] These values, among others, have never been universally absolute and they considerably vary from one socio-economic context to another.

II

In Arab countries a study which started earlier this year, simultaneously with the IIC Television Flow Project, but has yet to be completed, takes into consideration the "gate keeper" concept together with audience preferences and remarks.[7] A great interaction between forces of planned socio-economic change and news values has been found to be taking place and is conspicuous enough to draw the attention of social scientists and media research workers. The direct impact of socio-economic changes on attitudes and news values is equally being analyzed in connection with an attempt to determine how far activities carried out by the press, radio and T.V. are causally related to positive or negative social behaviour regarding development plans. Because of other uniting ethnic, cultural and economic factors that constitute the concept of One Arab Nation, this study deals with Arab countries as one integral region in spite of variations that distinguish their individual socio-economic contexts.

Preliminary findings of this study that covered one week of press, radio and T.V. new stories (June 17-24, 1977) indicate that, after presidential, royal and national political news, the following fifteen categories were, in the order shown below, the top among other categories of news carried, or not carried, by the media (criteria for evidence of prominent projection being banner headline, first page, space alloted to a story and emphasis carrying devices in radio and T.V. coverage):

Economic development (general)

Housing

Social and political guarantees for workers and peasants (Egypt)

Education

Social Security

Sports

Utilities

Desert Reclamation

Family Planning (Egypt)

Health Services

Crime

Urbanization

Transfer of Technology

Religious Events

Women's Rights

In a group of countries with a total area equaling one tenth of the world area, with a population of 3.4% of the world population but with an income rated only at 1.1% of that of the world and with an average per capita consumption of electricity rated at 2% of the average in the U.S. in spite of the fact that they are a major oil producer and exporter,[8] over-concern with development and a decent living is only natural. To the peoples of that part of the world, issues revolving around development are much more important than pollution, the energy crisis, safety on the streets, launching of Enterprise or the arrest of Son of Sam. This concern is legitimately reflected in the media's system of priorities. Racial discrimination is not a social issue in the Arab countries as it does not exist in those countries but it derives its importance from its political and human rights context in South Africa and the Arab Israeli conflicts.

As far as "gate keepers" are concerned, all radio and TV services are

state-owned with the exception of one T.V. station in Lebanon, and therefore all newsmen employed by them are directly or indirectly on their government's payroll. The press is different but there is considerable political leverage in their mangement that makes their news staff more conformist than non-conformist. The oldest among them are in their fifties while the youngest are in their twenties. Most of them (about 90%) work in a metropolis although many among them (about 60%) were born and brought up and received their elementary and secondary education in the country. A majority of staffers (about 80%) think that an accelerated economic development accompanied by an intensive transfer of technology and measures to promote social justice are the only remedy to the economic and social ills of the area. This is almost identical with the declared policies of the governments and views expressed by a majority (about 80%) of the audience sample interviewed. In answer to another question, most of them (about 70%) expressed their conviction that the return of peace to the Middle East is a pre-requisite of the desired socio-economic change.

Many of the "gate keepers" in this part of the world are conscious of a direct relationship between their news values and socio-economic priorities as clearly defined by national consensus. The changes attributed to national liberation and oil revenues have become almost integrated with their own personal value systems with their roots deeply intrenched in tradition. In an interview published two months ago by the Herald Tribune an Arab from Bahrain said, "With the advent of oil we discovered a lot of things in life. There was a new trend. People wanted to build houses, wanted to travel, to know other people. They are really eager to see the advancements but they want to

keep their traditions too." The media is busy catering to these expectations.

At the same time a minority (about 10%) among the "gate keepers" interviewed showed apprehensions expressed three decades ago by Lazarsfeld and Merton about the "narcotizing dysfunction" of mass media. They are afraid lest the heavy supply of news may elicit a superficial concern that "cloaks mass apathy". The implicit warning is against an overdose which may transform "the energies of men from active participation into passive knowledge". In this context of news values and social priorities negative awareness should never be allowed to be a substitute for action and exposure to news should not induce passive satisfaction with a "secondary contact with the world". This constitutes a serious interruption of the circuit in the information-action model of communication.

In this vast area of news values and socio-economic priorities, special attention has to be given to the roles of both leadership and the masses and their motivation in bringing about universally accepted standards of practice which will eventually lead to a sharing of values and mutual understanding of priorities compatible, in exercise of the inalienable right to inform and to be informed, with the vast strides of communication technology which have brought peoples of the world closer together, narrowed social and cultural gaps and almost eliminated distances.

Now is the time for communicators of all nations to consider the possibilities of this great human adventure.

NOTES

1. David Manning White, "The'Gate Keepers'", Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 27 (1949) p. 383 and Paul B. Snider,"'Mr. Gates'Revisited", Journalism Quarterly , Vol. 44 (1967) p. 419.

   In 1949 D.M. White and again in 1967, P.B. Snider, in an attempt to study "gate keepers" value systems, asked "Mr. Gates", a telegraph editor, to tell them why he selected or excluded stories carried by the wires.

2. Tony Schwartz, The Responsive Chord, (New York, Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1974) p. 140.

3. Ibid, p. 44.

4. Edward J. Epstein, News from Nowhere, (New York, Vintage Books, 1974) p. 201.

5. Donald McDonald, "The Media's Conflict of Interests", The Center Magazine (November/December 1976)

6. Harold Lasswell, paper published in The Community of Ideas, 1948 and reprinted in Process and Effect of Mass Communication, edited by Wilbur Schramm and Donald Roberts, (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1972) pp. 94, 95.

7. Unpublished study by the author of this paper.

8. Unpublished study on Global Modeling by Dr. Mohamed M. Al-Imam.